Over the last few months and years, it’s been hard to ignore “the War on College,” as it was referred to in a recent Newsweek cover story. We are criticized either for coddling “snowflake” students who demand “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings” or for our lack of socio-economic diversity and coddling of wealthy students demanding “lazy rivers.” People say we cost too much, and don’t prepare students for jobs, leaving them with crippling debt and little of value.

This assault on higher education comes at a time when, in fact, the value of a college degree is stronger than ever. The need for a highly educated workforce continues to increase, as does the need for critical thinking skills that allow us -- to draw from the title of one of our classes – to “call BS” on the onslaught of questionable information we’re exposed to. And our students are less privileged and more diverse than they were a few decades ago in every imaginable way. For those of us within the academy, the criticisms are a bit of a head scratcher. Something is getting lost in translation.

Today, I want to talk about our values, the value of higher education and our very purpose. This is relevant to our whole community because it is incumbent on all of us, including our staff, students, alumni and friends to refute these all too common myths and misperceptions.

But, at times, I’ll be addressing faculty more specifically, because as educators we must also consider what we’re doing, or not doing enough of, that has allowed these myths to take root. I will end with a call for members of the academy to look inward, examine our culture and our academic reward system and whether it best serves us in this era of skepticism, volatility and rapid flux.

The case is strong and compelling, and the facts clearly suggest, that higher education, and especially public higher education, contributes to the public good on a larger scale than perhaps any other institution. Because of their unique role in both education and research, or knowledge production, universities are arguably the most powerful tool we have for increasing equity and social mobility across all populations.

A recent Pew Center study found that over the course of their work lives college graduates earn between a half to a million dollars over those who haven’t earned a degree. Those higher earning jobs also tend to have retirement benefits and health insurance, adding to the earnings differential, sometimes referred to as the “college dividend.” College graduates are also three times less likely to be unemployed, the biggest disparity in the modern era between those with and without a degree.
And the “college dividend” is more than monetary. Those with college degrees report not just better paying, but more satisfying jobs. Degree-holders have healthier lifestyles. They donate more to charity, are more likely to vote and demonstrate greater civic engagement – traits they pass on to their children and that support healthy democracies. What happens at our universities is the embodiment of, “If you give someone a fish, they eat for a day, if you TEACH someone to fish, they eat for a lifetime.” And — so do their children!

But does the dividend outweigh the cost? We read that parents can’t save enough to pay for college and students can’t earn enough to work their way through. So they take on debt that hampers them for decades.

What’s true? As you can see, it depends on the higher ed sector. Those students carrying the largest debt come from the for-profit sector; those with the lowest come from public universities. And, average debt at UW is even lower than that.

Now, $22,000 is NOTHING to sneeze at! I’m not waving away the seriousness of student debt and I truly understand that the financial challenges of living and studying in a region where costs are climbing are very real. But certainly for the vast majority of undergraduate students at the UW, the debt they incur to get their bachelor’s degree here is not enough to derail their future and it doesn’t even come close to outweighing the earnings premium or “college dividend” for degree-earners. And the data bears this out: the student debt default rate for UW students is under 3%.

It’s also worth noting that the percentage of students who graduate with debt varies widely by type of institution, and that among undergraduates of the UW – nearly 60 percent graduate without any known debt at all.

So, who benefits the most from the college dividend? Is it, as some say, just the rich getting richer? Again, it depends.

According to an Equality of Opportunity report in 2017, on average, Ivy League colleges have more students from families in the top 1% of the income distribution than students from the entire bottom half of our country’s earners. So, in some places that does seem to be true.

And too often, when the public, and even more so East Coast journalists and politicians, think about colleges and universities, it’s the Harvards and Yales and Princetons that come to mind. After all, a third of our Presidents, including the one now in office, have received their degrees from Ivy League schools. As do almost a quarter of our current U.S. Senators. Every one of our current Supreme Court justices attended either Harvard or Yale Law School.

It’s not surprising that perceptions of universities are so colored by this small handful. Yet, when they come to represent all students and institutions of higher education, it stereotypes both. Elite private universities undoubtedly play an important role in the higher ed ecosystem, but their role in the public imagination is outsized.

In fact, the vast majority, about 80%, of all college degrees, are earned at public colleges and universities where many, if not most students are low to middle income. And these students are reaping the college dividend too.

With tuitions generally under $15,000 a year for in-state students and financial aid available through scholarships, grants and low-cost loans, many, indeed most, public colleges and universities remain
within reach for in-state students. In this past decade, about a half dozen public universities even started programs that offer free tuition to low-income Pell-eligible students. This includes our own Husky Promise, now in its 10th year!

While tuition is not the only barrier for low-income students, addressing “sticker shock” up-front is important to attracting and admitting them. Since we started the Husky Promise, almost 40,000 have attended the UW tuition-free. This year alone we have about 10,000 students across our three campuses who pay no tuition.
Most also get additional aid toward room and board. Talk about free college!!

A college degree IS within financial reach for many more students than many people realize. At the UW, about 30% of UW students are first-generation. Especially gratifying is the fact that when low-income students graduate from high quality universities like the UW, there is no income differential later in life between them and their high-income peers – the leveling effect is real. College is one of the best and most effective vehicles for social mobility, serving the goals of equity and social justice that we hold dear.

Social mobility happens because, unlike the stereotypes some are pushing, our students do not spend day after day cloistered alone in dusty garrets reading obscure tomes — although ancient tomes can be refreshingly current in their insights — there’s even a book called “If Aristotle’s Kid had an iPhone: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Parenting.

First off, classrooms have changed — now some of them are flipped! And, in addition to the incredible learning, questioning, and discovery taking place inside them, students also take advantage of a variety of opportunities outside of class — opportunities to travel, to do research, to attend evening lectures, plays, and dance recitals, to take internships — that can alter the course of their lives.

Those who earn a degree ARE signaling, as it’s been called, but WHAT they are signaling to employers is their determination and discipline. They have demonstrated they can undertake the challenge of starting and finishing a degree program, have spent time in a diverse and dynamic environment. They’re signaling that they have been challenged by a broad set of views and perspectives on a wide range of topics and that they have learned to think critically about them.

And, our students are the least coddled generation of students ever. They are more diverse than ever before in almost any manner imaginable, including socioeconomically, ethnically and culturally than ever before.

Historically our universities have been fairly homogenous and students had no reason to examine, or even be aware of, their privilege; today they run into those who ask, even demand that they do. These collisions can be uncomfortable, but they better prepare students to participate in a workforce that is diverse and global. AND they learn to engage in the world in its fullness, not just to interact with a small piece of it. This too adds to the value of their degree, because our aim is also to shape responsible, caring citizens who understand difference and the need for engaged social action.

In addition to what they do for individuals who attend them, universities also lift up the economy of the community, region, and state in which they’re located, and well beyond. Companies seek to locate in areas home to a well-educated workforce and highly talented producers of knowledge. In Amazon’s search for a second headquarters, they made clear that the presence of a nearby research university was among their criteria.
Employers WANT the students we graduate and the competition for talent is especially great in our region. Right now, we are among the top ten states in the nation for jobs that require a four-year degree...but, we’re in the bottom ten for the number of students who earn these degrees. Talk about a mismatch!

And, by the way, it’s not just students graduating with STEM degrees that they want — although we do exceedingly well in this respect, about 40% of our students graduate with a STEM degree. Employers hire our students across the board, whether they graduate in business, education, public health, sociology, history or the arts. They are our future teachers, social workers, health care providers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, legislators and more. We provide the hands-on, project-based learning that employers look for when they hire. The same goes for leadership experience and global perspectives.

Our undergraduates often begin their first jobs having acquired significant experience through internships, public service and research, in fact last year almost 9,000 students worked with faculty to produce 1.4 million hours of research.

Our graduates drive the economy by filling the positions employers need, AND often together with faculty, they create jobs as they start their own businesses. A study conducted in 2014 found that across our three campuses, the UW generates 12.5 BILLION dollars A YEAR in economic impact.

Almost one in every 50 jobs in our state – about 80,000 – are attributable to the UW, more than half in health and medicine. We return about $200 million more to state and local governments than what the state contributes to our operating budget! Not to mention the $417 million A YEAR in uncompensated care we provide to our state’s poorest residents, or what our faculty, staff and students contribute through philanthropy and volunteer work.

As John F. Kennedy noted in his address at the UW for our 100th anniversary, “I think this university and others like it across the country, and its graduates, have recognized that these schools are not maintained by the people of the various States in order to merely give the graduates of these schools an economic advantage in the life struggle. Rather, these schools are supported by our people because our people realize that this country has needed in the past, and needs today as never before, educated men and women who are committed to the cause of freedom.”

This statement is every bit as timely today as it was then. And, of course, as a research University, we also serve the public through discovery. The knowledge produced by our nation’s research universities is transforming our capacity to treat and eliminate devastating diseases, from HPV to Ebola. It’s advancing clean energy technology, which future generations will thank us for. It’s demonstrating how social work, psychology, and technology can combine to help reduce teen suicides, and how historical analysis can help us understand how we got here and how we can avoid the mistakes of the past. It’s about art, music, dance, and poetry that inspire creativity and make our lives brighter and more fulfilling.

It would be hard to find a person on the planet whose well-being has not been improved or empowered by advances rooted in university research. And despite troubling rhetoric dismissing the impact of universities, the truth is that most Americans, over 70 percent — agree that funding for research that “pays off” is a good use of public funds. Sometimes the payoff is obvious, as in the discovery of penicillin. But it can be challenging to demonstrate the “pay off” for work that can take years or decades to show its value. Research gains are often incremental, their progress and outcome unpredictable.

We might not see the impact of basic or curiosity-driven science in the short-term, but the long-term impact can be truly monumental. Think of the laser, created in an attempt to understand the cosmos, to
touch the face of God -- that ended up being a vital tool for making surgery more precise and less invasive. Or the work of our most recent Nobel prize winner in physics David Thouless, whose work in theoretical physics opened up entirely new fields of research with implications for electronic devices — everything from advanced superconductors to quantum computers to other applications we can hardly imagine.

It’s hard to square evidence this strong for the value of a college degree and what universities bring to society with the rising tide of public distrust. But, we ignore it at our peril. The consequences of not addressing public sentiments are real: state disinvestment, lack of federal support for research or financial aid for students. All are ultimately bad not only for those of us who learn and work at universities, but for all of society.

So, what do we need to do? What change do we need to catalyze? Let’s begin by looking at where we are. Last fall, the journal Science published an article aimed at aspiring faculty with the headline, “Hoping for a faculty job? Here’s what hiring committees are looking for.”

In the article, an anthropology professor-turned-academic career coach offered this advice: “Applicants often write cover letters that are too long and filled with emotion-related statements, such as ‘I am passionate about’ or ‘I strongly believe in.’ She advises her clients to write concise cover letters that focus on research outcomes in terms of published peer-reviewed articles [because] ‘Any other focus is going to harm them [rather] than help them on the job market.’”

What a dismal picture this paints of our career and what we care about! Just try to imagine another profession in which declaring a passionate interest for the work would be a mark against you. Yet for many of us, it WAS passion that drew us to our work. In fact, I see it as our mission to inspire that passion in the students we teach, mentor and collaborate with — a passion about ideas, about learning, about community, about making the world a healthier place to live, for their generation and the ones that will follow.

And yet, this advice in Science has a familiar ring to me. Although not all faculty subscribe to this thinking, some junior faculty DO fear to color outside the lines of the conventional tenure track and promotion structure. The implicit, if not explicit, message they get is: “Don’t waste time on speaking to non-academics,” or, “Writing for the popular media will make you seem less serious.” They also hear “service or community or civic involvement is great, but don’t do too much before tenure OR after.”

As academics, we have dedicated our professional lives to developing expertise, and we are acknowledged for sharing it with other academics through publication in peer reviewed journals. And that’s how it should be in research universities like ours. It’s by speaking to peers that we advance the research mission, and build the knowledge base in our fields. That SHOULD be valued. But we shouldn’t undervalue sharing that knowledge and understanding more broadly, in ways that inspire, inform and, in fact, help to better our communities and the world.

At the risk of endangering MY tenure, at least in this job, I strongly believe that some aspects of our academic culture need to change for the long-term health of higher education and, dare I say, for the people that we SERVE and who pay our salaries.

I’m asking us to think seriously about what activities we value and incentivize and what activities we merely tolerate, or worse, dismiss.
A recent *Scientific American* survey of chairs of U.S. and Canadian medical departments revealed almost no support for efforts by junior faculty to communicate about their work to non-scholarly audiences, “because [it does] not count toward attaining tenure or promotions. The only things that count are publishing research in respected journals, getting grants, teaching and serving on a university committee.”

But change is in the air. Georgia Tech is discussing ways to recognize outreach when assessing promotions and making plans to teach scientists the skills to write and speak publicly. The University of Michigan has undertaken a new initiative to reimagine and expand public engagement. The National Science Foundation now provides grants specifically to address public outreach. And the American Sociological Association actually recommend that public engagement be considered when granting tenure and promotion.

Great things are happening here at the UW as well.

The College of the Environment, where faculty are increasingly called upon to share knowledge that can inform some of society’s most critical decisions related to climate change and impacts, has created resources to support faculty in talking about their work. These events, trainings and opportunities to share the impact of teaching and research send a strong signal that the UW supports public engagement and provides expertise to prevent and mitigate environmental impacts.

In collaboration with UW News, last year 37 faculty across the UW contributed 44 articles to The Conversation. The Conversation is an innovative non-profit that pairs faculty experts with journalists to write about issues of public interest for major media outlets. News outlets can republish them for free — another way to combat the tide of misinformation masquerading as news.

Last year, Professors Rajesh Rao and James Wu, from the Center for Sensorimotor Neural Engineering, wrote about the melding of mind and machine. Their piece was picked up by *Scientific American* and CNN, among others. And history professor Laurie Marhoefer’s article on protesting in response to white nationalism was voted the year’s most memorable article by The Conversation’s readers and editors. That’s impact!

And when I talk about public engagement, I don’t mean to suggest that it’s limited to public speaking and writing. Incredible work is happening to integrate scholarship with community activism and involvement, a shift in thinking that we need more of.

Through the Urban@UW Homelessness Research Initiative, more than 70 faculty from disciplines across the UW are engaged in homelessness-related community embedded research, teaching and service. Professor Lilo Pozzo, through her work with the Clean Energy Institute, is installing solar-powered microgrids in Puerto Rico as part of a research project that both advances our knowledge and serves humanity. And our School of Music is about to begin their tenth year of a project in Toppenish-White Swan to enrich and entice learning in and through music on the Yakama Reservation. These young people are expressing through song their hopes and dreams of who they want to become, of how they wish to connect with their heritage, and the ways they hope to help their families. Talk about passion and inspiration!!

It is a testament to our faculty’s profound passion and commitment to our great public mission that, together with staff and students, they put so much of their time and energy into this work that’s not well rewarded come tenure and promotion or through merit raises. Indeed, despite our own reward systems, great work is happening. And it has impact; the impact is all around us.
I ask us, however, to consider how we can share more about this extraordinary work and explore even more ways to serve people and find better ways to connect so that the people of Washington can say confidently, “I trust the University of Washington and I value what it does for our state.”

The question of how we might reimagine rewards and incentives for faculty who “go public” is not one that I can answer alone. That responsibility lies with us as university faculty, and as faculty involved in our professional networks and organizations. It is a longer and more complicated conversation and it’s not something that can or should be enacted in a top-down manner. This is not for ME to decide for YOU.

What I can and will do is try to set an example in my own role as president and to celebrate the efforts of others, saying loud and clearly that that I value public scholarship, community partnerships and community and professional service. They are essential to the health of our university and our public mission.

That’s why I support our current effort to earn the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. This distinction recognizes colleges and universities with an institutional focus on community engagement. In applying for this elective classification, we are looking hard at ourselves, our relationships with our community. We’re looking at what we’re doing across the University to collaborate and engage with the people of Rainier Valley, Yesler Terrace, Colville, the Tri-Cities – communities all across Washington State and beyond. This is a values-driven exercise that places our core values of public service, value of place and trust at the center of our analysis. I look forward to sharing more about this effort as it progresses.

As president, I serve as an ambassador for the UW with many stakeholders... and whether it’s in Bellingham or Beijing, my goal is the same: to share your great work and why it matters. As I say with full confidence: the University of Washington really is the University FOR Washington, and ultimately, for the nation and the world.

Sometimes, the incredible people who live and work in our state and beyond — in cities large and small, urban or rural, share their concerns with me. Whether in communities fearing our almost mind-numbing growth, or communities worried that they’ve been left behind — in every case they want a better world for their children — our children, OUR communities.

As faculty and staff, you represent an extraordinary community of learning and expertise. And I can tell you that the communities and people we serve want to hear from you. In King County, civic leaders want to know about health issues that are causing vast disparities in life expectancy within a few square miles. In Spokane and Eastern Washington, people want to know how our partnership with Gonzaga is improving health care in their communities. Americans everywhere want to know what research can tell us about how to reduce gun violence or slow the effects of climate change. Each of us has something valuable to say and each of us has the power to serve as an ambassador for the passion that we came here to pursue.

I’ve been at this University for more than 30 years, and the passion I’m here to pursue is a passion for excellence, access, and the public good. Not only for our students, but for all of Washington — and all of the world!

So, I will say loudly and clearly: Go for it! Tell the world what you’re passionate about. Tell the world what you “strongly believe in.” Let’s support, encourage and assist each other in sharing and expanding
the enormous public impact of our public university. If there ever was an ivory tower, I know you and I aren’t sitting in it, so let’s raise our voices and SHOW the public, through words and deeds, what universities can do for the greater good.

Thank you. I am really looking forward to your questions today and to an ongoing conversation about how we can cultivate a culture of public engagement, together.